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By  
**MICHAEL GOLD**

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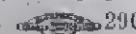
# THE DAMNED AGITATOR FREE! THE COAL BREAKER

By Michael Gold.

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290

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## The Damned Agitator

THE strike was now smoldering into its seventh week, and, perhaps, it would soon be a bitter ash in the mouths of the men. For funds were at an ebb, scabs were coming in like a locust plague, the company officials were growing more and more militant in their self-righteousness, and the strikers themselves were drifting into a settled state of depression and dangerous self-distrust. Their solidarity was beginning to show fissures and aching cracks.

All these woeful conditions beat in like a winter sea on the tired brain of Kurelovitch with the bleak morning light that waked him. He lifted his throbbing head from the pillow, looked about the dingy bedroom with his bleary sleep-glazed eyes, and heaved a long, troubled sigh out of his pain.

At a meeting of company executives once Kurelovitch had been denounced as a dangerous agitator, whose pathological thirst for violence had created and sustained the strike.



"The man is a menace, a mad dog, whose career ought to be stopped before he does more mischief," said one venerable director, his kind, blue eyes developing a pinkish glare that would have horrified the women folk of his family.

"The scoundrel's probably pocketing half of the strike funds," declared another director with plump, rosy gills and a full, bald head that glittered like a sunset cloud, as he stunned the long table with a blow of his balled fist.

But Kurelovitch was not a mad dog, and he was not waxing fat with industrial spoils, as so many of the directors had. He was really a tall, tragic, rough-hewn Pole, who had been suddenly hammered into leadership by the crisis of the strike, by reason of his unquenchable integrity and social fire. He had deep, blue, burning eyes, a rugged nose and moustaches, and his hands and form were ungainly, work-twisted symbols of the life of drudgery he had led.

Now he was thinking wearily of all the thorny problems that would be heaped upon him that day in the course of the strike. As he extricated himself from the bedclothes and sat up to dress, the problems writhed and clamored in his jaded brain for solution. For seven weeks now he had risen almost at dawn and had labored till midnight at the Titan task of

wringing a fifteen per cent increase out of capitalism for his fellow workers. He had grown gaunt and somber and wise in the process; skeptical of man and of god. He had seen plans collapse, heads broken unjustly, sentences inflicted by corrupt judges, babies and women starving. He had heard himself assailed as a monster by the other group, and as a weakling and tool by the more embittered of his own side.

His wife heard him sigh, and she called from the kitchen, where she was already stirring.

"There ain't no coffee for you this morning, Stanislaw," she announced in a sullen voice, in which there was also anger and scorn. "And there ain't no nothin' else to eat, only a few hunks of old bread."

Kurelovitch stumbled wearily to his feet and entered the malodorous kitchen. Greasy pans and platters and sour garbage were strewn about, and in an opaque cloud of smoke his wife was hovering over the stove, their fourth child mewling in the nest of her arms. She was heating all the milk she had for the infant, and when her husband came in she turned on him with swift virulence.

"No, not a taste of food in the house, damn you," she spat. "And the kids went to bed last night without hardly any supper."

"But it's not my fault, now, is it, Annie?" the big man returned humbly as he went over

to her and put an arm over her shoulder. She cast it off with fierce contempt, and stood him off with a volley of words that were like poisoned arrows, each piercing straight to his vital parts.

"It is your fault, you clumsy fool, you," she screamed out of her over-laden heart. "You were one of the first men to go out on strike, even though we hadn't a penny in the house at the time. And last week when the company wanted the men to come back you talked them out of it, and so we're all still starving, thanks to you."

"But, Annie—" the tall man attempted gently.

"Don't Annie me, or try to fool me with one of your speeches. You know the strike's lost as well as I do, and that after it you'll be black-listed in every mill town in New England. But you don't care if your children starve, do you? You'd be glad to see us all dead, wouldn't you?"

The man had crumpled under the attack, and he seemed as small almost as his infuriated wife. But then he straightened in the dusty pallor of the kitchen, and moved to the door.

"I'll see that you get a lot of groceries and things from headquarters this morning," he said huskily, as he went out into the dark, bitter streets.

Kurelovitch shivered at his contact with the gray, sharp air. A thin ash of snow had fallen

through the night, and was now a noisome slush, after its brief experience with the mill town, which degraded everything it touched. The muddy ooze squirmed through the vulnerable spots in his shoes, and started the gooseflesh along Kurelovitch's spine. Across the river in the drab morning he could see the residential heights where the rich dwelt, and they reminded him of the village of his youth, with its girdle of snow-covered hills and peaceful cottages. He remembered a Polish lullaby his mother used to sing to him, and shivered the more.

From the rough bridge which bound the split halves of the town he could see the mill, glowing and blocking shadows deep as ignorance on the rotting ice of the river. The resplendent emblem of America gleamed and waved from a staff on the low, sprawling structure, as if to sanctify all that went on beneath. And now Kurelovitch had traversed a morass of decaying huts and offal-strewn streets and was directly within the massive shadow of the mill. Two or three of his fellow-workers recognized him, and came hurrying forward from the picket line. Kurelovitch's day had begun.

"The damned gunmen are out for fight this morning," said a sombre, chunky Pole, swathed in old burlap and a tremendous fur cap that had come from Europe.

"Yes, they must have gotten more booze



than usual last night," said another striker between his chattering teeth.

A young picket with brooding, dark eyes burst out with a hot voice, "Well, we'll give them any fight they want, the dirty lice. We're not afraid." Kurelovitch put his hand on the young chap, and then the three went with him to where about fifty or more of the strikers were shifting slowly up and down the length of the wide mill gate.

There were men and women in the line, all dark and silent and seeming more like a host of mourners than anything else in the world of bitter sky and slush-laden earth. They were muffled to the chins in grotesque rags, and their breaths went up like incense in the chill morning. A mood of sadness and suspense hung about them, and whenever they passed the knot of gunmen at the gate they turned their eyes away almost in grief.

Two of the gunmen had detached themselves from the evil-eyed mob huddled, like a curse, at the gate. They carried clubs in their hands, and at their hips could be seen bulging the badges of their mission in life, which was to break strikes and to murder.

They came up to Kurelovitch and sneered at him with sadistic eyes. As he walked up and down in the sluggish picket line, they dogged him and used their vilest art to taunt him into resistance.

About an hour later, as he was departing from the line, the two gunmen still followed him. A little group of pickets, therefore, formed themselves in a cordon about Kurelovitch and escorted him to the strike headquarters, burning all the way with repressed rage. Kurelovitch was a marked man in the strike zone, and his maiming was a subject of much yearning and planning by the gunmen.

The daily meetings of the strikers were held in a great barn-like structure in the center of the tangled streets and alleys of the mill-workers' quarters. A burst of oratory smote Kurelovitch as he entered the great room and a thousand faces, staring row on row, orientated to the leader as he marched in.

"Kurelovitch, Kurelovitch has come," ran a murmur like wind through a forest.

Kurelovitch leaped on the rough stage, where others of the strike committee were sitting, and whispered in consultation with a fellow Pole. He learned that there was nothing of moment that day—no sign from the bosses nor funds from sympathizers. It was merely another of the dark days of the strike.

"But many of the Russians are getting restless," the man whispered. "Ravillof has been at them, and yesterday their priest told them to go back. Give 'em hell, Kurelovitch!"

Kurelovitch came to the edge of the platform in a hush like that of an operating room, looking out over a foam of varied faces. They were

faces that had blown into the golden land on the twelve winds of the world, though about nine-tenths of the faces were the broad-boned, earthy, beautiful faces of mystic Slavdom. Daylight struggled through large, smutty windows and dusted the heads and shoulders of the strikers with a white, transcendent powder. A huge oilcloth behind Kurelovitch proclaimed in big, battering letters, "We Average \$9 a Week and We Are Demanding 15 Per Cent More. Are You With Us?"

The air tightened as Kurelovitch loomed there, a sad hero, stooped and gaunt with many cares. Finger-deep hollows were in his cheeks, and, with his blazing eyes and strong mouth, he seemed like some ascetic follower of the warrior Mohammed.

"Fellow workers. . . ."

In low, thrilling Polish he began by disposing of the secular details of the strike, as on every day. Then something would come over Kurelovitch, a strange feeling of automatism, as if he were indeed only the voice that this simple-hearted horde had created out of their woe. The searing phrases would rush from his lips in a wild, stormy music, like the voice of a gale, as as mystic and powerful.

With both hands holding his breast, as if it were bursting with passionate vision, Kurelovitch lifted his face in one of his superb moments and flamed up like an Isaiah.

"Fellow workers," he chanted, giving the words a value such as cannot be transmitted by mere writing, "we can never be beaten, for we are the workers on whose shoulders rest the pillars of the world and in whose hands are the tools by which life is carried on. Life, liberty and happiness—let us not rest till we have gotten these for ourselves and our children's children! Let us not permit the accidents of a strike to stay us on our journey toward the beautiful city of freedom, whose grace is one day to shine on all the world.

"We are beginning to starve, some of us, but let us starve bravely, for we are soldiers in a greater and nobler war than that which is bleeding Europe. We are soldiers in the class war which is finally to set mankind free of all war and all poverty, all bosses and hate. Workingmen of the world, unite; we have nothing to lose but our chains; we have a world to gain!"

Kurelovitch ended in a great shout, and then the handclapping and whistles rose to him in turbulent swirls. He found himself suddenly weary and limp and melancholy, and his deepest wish was to go off somewhere alone to wait until the hollow places inside were refilled. . . .

But, with the others of the strike committee, he left the platform and fused into the discussions that were raging everywhere. Everybody tried to come near Kurelovitch, to speak to him. He was a common hearth at which



his people crowded and shouldered for warmth, his starving, wistful people who believed him when he said they could wipe out the accumulated woe of humanity. . . .

He was treated to long recitals of the workings of the proletarian soul in this time of want and panic and anger. He heard a hundred tales of temptation, of desperate hunger, of outrages at the hands of the gunmen. Kurelovitch listened to it all like a grave, kind father confessor, untying many a Gordian knot with his clear-eyed strength and understanding.

And then came to him Raviloff, the leader of the Russians, a short, black, wrinkled man, with slow eyes that became living coals of fire when passion breathed on them.

He was angry to impotence now. "You said in your speech that I was a traitor, Kurelovitch," he shouted fiercely. "You lie; I am not. But we Russians think this strike is lost, and that we'd all better go back before it's too late."

"It's not lost," Kurelovitch replied slowly. "The mills can't work full time until we choose to go back. And, Raviloff, I say again that you're a scab and traitor if you go back now."

Raviloff flushed purple with wrath, and rushed upon the tall Pole as if to devour him. But Kurelovitch did not lift his stern, calm gaze from the other's face, and a light like that of swords came and went in his blue eyes. The Russian surged up and touched him, chest to

chest, and then Kurelovitch intrigued the other into a sensible discussion that served to keep the Russian on the firing line. . . .

And thus it went. So Kurelovitch passed his day, moving from the swooning brink of one crisis to another. He sat with the strike committee for many hours in a smoky room and agonized over ways and means. He addressed another large meeting at headquarters in the afternoon. He went out on the picket line and was singled out for threats and taunts again by the gunmen, so that he felt murder boiling in his deeps and left. Then he had to return later to the picket line because word was rushed to him that five of the pickets had been arrested in a fight finally precipitated by the gunmen. Kurelovitch spent the rest of the afternoon scurrying about and finding bail for the five.

Toward night he had a supper of ham sandwiches and coffee, and then he and three of the strike committee went to a meeting of sympathizers about fifteen miles away. Kurelovitch made his third passionate address of the day, and stirred up a large collection. The long, dull, wrenching ride home followed.

He got off the trolley car near his house about midnight, his brain whirling and hot, his heart acrid and despairing. The urgency of the fight was passed, and nothing was left to buoy him against his weariness. He walked



in a stupor; the day had sucked every atom of his valor and strength. He wished dumbly for death; he was the cold ashes of the flaming Kurelovitch of the day. Had gunmen come now and threatened him he would have cringed and then wept.

There was a feeble light waning and wavering in the window of his little three-room flat, and when he had fumbled with the lock and opened the dilapidated door he found some one brooding with folded arms near the stove. It stood up awfully and turned on him with baleful eyes, like a wild beast in its cave.

"You rotten dog!" his wife screamed at Kurelovitch in the vast quiet of the night. "You mean and dirty pig!"

"Annie, dear—"

"To go away in the morning and leave us to starve! To send food to other's families and then to forget us! Oh, you'd be glad if we all died of starvation! You'd laugh to see us all dead, you murderer!"

Kurelovitch was too sorrowful to attempt an answer. He went to the bedroom where he and two of the children slept and shut the door behind him. His wife took this for a gesture of contempt, and her frenzy mounted to a blood-curdling crescendo that ran up and down the neighborhood like a ravaging blight. Heads popped out of windows and bawled to her to stop for Christ's sake. And, finally she broke

down of sheer exhaustion and Kurelovitch heard her shuffling into bed.

There was anguished silence, and then Kurelovitch heard his poor, overburdened drudge of a wife weeping terribly, with gulping sobs that hurt him like knives . . .

And now he could not sleep at all, even after her sobbing had merged into ugly snoring. He tossed as in a fever, as he had on so many other nights of the seven frantic weeks of the strike.

He went blindly for relief to the window, beyond which reigned the cold, inimical night. The shabby slum street dwindled to an obscure horizon, and the mass of the mill building could be seen dominating over the ragged houses. No being was abroad in the desolate dark; he saw a chain of weak lanterns casting morbid shadows, and the vicious wind whipping up the litter of the streets. The stars were white and high overhead, as distant as beauty from the place where Kurelovitch burned with sleeplessness. He heard the rattling gurgling snore of his wife.

Kurelovitch ached with his great need of forgetfulness. As he twitched on his humid bed the days that had gone and the darker days to come ranged about and taunted him like fiends. The feeling that he held the fate of the strike in his hand rested on him monstrously, and his starving children made him gasp and cry like one drowning.

In dumb anguish he prayed unconsciously to the power of the righteousness, to God or whatever fate it was that had brought him into the world. But no relief came that way, and, finally, after a struggle, he groped with all his pangs to a little dresser in the room, where he searched out a brandy bottle. This he took to bed with him, and drank and drank and drank again, till the past and the more terrible future were blurred in kindly night, and the great dark wings of peace folded over him and he sank into the maternal arms of oblivion.

On the morrow he would wake and find the ring of problems haunting him again, and he would grapple them again in his big, tragic fashion till his soul bled with many fresh wounds as he stumbled home in the night. And thus he would go on and on till he was broken or dead, for Kurelovitch had dared to spit into the face of the beast that reigns mankind, and never for this sin would he be permitted to know sweetness or rest under the wide shining range of the heavens.

## Free!

THE morning was spent unwinding the yards of red tape that are woven into the steel chains of a prison. The four I. W. W. prisoners were checked thru several offices, the warden spoke to them a moment or two, then they turned in their gray prison clothes and received in exchange their own forgotten creased clothes, stale after five years' repose in a bag. Then they were searched twice for contraband letters, then they were given their railroad tickets to Chicago, the city where they had been tried.

"So long, boys," one of the guards at the last steel door leading to the world said joyfully to them. He was a tall, portly, serene Irishman, with gray walrus moustaches, and he had seen hundreds of released men stand blinking like these four in the strange sunlight, dazed as if they had been fetched from the bottom of the sea. "So long, boys; drop in again some time when you're lonesome; we enjoyed your visit."

The men smiled awkwardly at him, stiffly and with the show of prison deference to a



guard. They were still deferential and cautious like prisoners; in their minds they were not yet free.

They walked silently down the flat dusty road leading from the penitentiary to the high-road, their jaws set, their pale faces appearing unfamiliar and haggard to each other as their eyes glanced from side to side.

"So this is America!" said little Blackie Doan, heaving a deep sigh and spitting hard and far into the road to display his nonchalance. Blackie was more nervous and trembling inside than any of the other men; but he could never forget that a gentleman swaggers and grins and spits with a tough air when he is in a difficult situation. This blow of sudden freedom and sunlight after five years in prison fell harder upon Blackie than upon the other men. He had just come, the day before, from five months of solitary confinement in a black, damp underground cell, where he had been expiating the worst of prison offenses. He had battered with fists and feet a guard more than half a foot his height for the reason that his guard had been beating with fist and blackjack and keys a weak, half-witted boy of nineteen who never seemed to remember his place in the line—another enormous prison crime.

"The land of the free and the home of the brave!" John Brown, a tall, lankly Englishman, with gray hair, hawk nose, and steady

blue eyes added monotonously, as in a litany. "Wish I had a chew of tobacco!"

The other two I. W. W. prisoners just released after their five years' punishment for the crime of having opposed a world war did not say a word, but stumbled along dumbly, as if waiting for something more interesting to happen. One was Hill Jones, a husky young western American, with the face and physique of a college football player, and with large luminous green eyes that stared at the world like those of an unspolied child's. The other I. W. W. was Ramon Gonzales, a young, slim, dark American-Mexican, the second generation of those hard-working Mexican peons who build the railroads of our western country.

"Wish I had a chew of tobacco!" repeated Brown, licking his dry lips with his tongue, and sweeping the brown drab prairie with his eyes. "Feel as if I could spit cotton!"

The truth was, he wanted the tobacco to steady his nerves. Like the others, he was quivering internally with a rout of weird emotions. He had lived for five years in a steel house, behind steel bars, in a routine that was enforced by men with blackjacks and shotguns, and that was inhuman and perfect as steel. Now he was free. No one was watching him; he was strolling down a hot country road, under the immense yellow sky. He was back in the word of free men and free women; and he, and the others with him should have

breathed deeply, kissed the earth and rejoiced; instead they seemed tense and worried, a little disappointed.

What had they expected? They could not have said, but like all prisoners, they had built up, without knowing it, fantastic and exaggerated notions of the world outside. It seemed a little ordinary to them now. The sky was a dun yellowish waste with a sun shining thru it. The wide dull prairie stretched on every hand like the floor of some empty barn, with shocks of gray rattling corn stacked in dreary rows, file after file to the horizon. A dog was barking somewhere. Smoke was rising from a score of farm-houses, and they heard the whistle of a distant freight train. There was dull burning silence on everything, the silence of the sun. The world of freedom seemed dull; but prisons are tense with sleepless emotions of hope and fear.

They were passing a farmer in a flannel shirt, plodding behind a team of huge horses in a field of stubble. His lean, brown face was covered with sweat and fixed in grim, unsmiling lines as he held down the bucking plow and left a path of rich black soil behind him.

"Looks like a guy in for life, doesn't he?" said Brown, pointing to him with his thumb. "Looks like that murderer cell-mate of yours, doesn't he, Ramon?"

The little Mexican cast a swift, worried

glance with his black eyes at the dull fanatic behind the plow.

"Yes," he said sharply, and stared back at the road behind his feet.

"Same old goddamn corn," said Blackie, grinning, as he kicked a tin can out of the road, and spat, all in the same moment. "Same old goddamn Hoosiers, raising the goddamn corn! Corn and Hoosiers—God, why don't they raise carrots once in a while?"

The others offered no answer to this American conundrum. They were moving on to fresh sights in this new world they had been thrust into—they were staring at the bend in the highroad where the town street began, two miles away from the prison. The ugly frame houses of the middle west set among trees and smooth lawns, the trolley tracks, the stone pavements, then the stores and shop windows when they came nearer the heart of the town—that was what they saw. Up and down the streets men and women walked in the humdrum routine of life. A grocer was weighing out sugar in a dark window. They passed the little shop of an Italian cobbler. They passed a white school building, from which came the sound of fresh young voices singing. There was a line of Fords standing at the curb near the railroad depot. There were more women and men walking slowly about the square near the depot, discussing housework, and the election for sheriff and the price



of corn and the price of hogs. This was the world.

"I don't see no brass bands out to meet us home," said Blackie, with his irrepressible grin. "How do you account for that, Hill? Ain't they heard we're coming?"

Hill, the young husky quarterback with the large green eyes, seemed unable to say a word. He scowled at Blackie, it seemed, and shook his head.

"What's the matter, Hill?" that worthy queried, with an insolent grin, "ain't we as good as they boys who fought to make the world safe for democracy?"

"Aw, shut up!" Hill Jones muttered, "you get as talkative as a parrot sometimes!"

"I'm an agitator, that's why I talk," Blackie jeered and would have said more, but that the Englishman Brown put his hand on Blackie's arm. There was a policeman loitering on the next corner, and for some strange reason, known only to ex-prisoners, the impassive Englishman was suddenly shaken to his soul.

"Let's get some coffee and," he said, leading them in the door of a cheap restaurant shaded by a wide brown maple tree. The four sat on stools against a broad counter loaded with plates of dessert, and looked into a mirror at their pale prison faces.

"Coffee and crullers," ordered the Englishman, naming the diet of all those who wander along the roads of America, and pick up their

food like the sparrows where they can find it.

"Ham and eggs," said Hill.

"Ham and eggs and French friend and coffee," said Blackie.

"Ham and eggs," said Ramon, in a muffled voice.

The restaurant proprietor, a fat, cheerful man in a white apron, had been counting bills at his cash register and talking crops with a young farm hand in overalls. He locked the register with a sharp snap and took their orders leisurely, the while guessing their status with his shrewd eyes. He repeated the orders into the little cubby hole leading to the kitchen.

"Solitary confinement, eh, what?" Blackie said to the Englishman, pointing at the forlorn, middle-aged face of the cook that peered out of the cubby hole and repeated the orders as if in a voice from the tomb.

Neither Brown nor the others answered, but waited with grim patience for their food. When it came, they wolfed it down rapidly, as if someone were watching over them. Blackie could not be still, however.

"This is better than the damn beans and rotten stew every day at the other hotel," he muttered. "Real ham and eggs! Oh, Boy!!"

Brown looked at the clock. It was just noon. "I guess the boys are having their grub now," he said. "Yes, there goes the whistle. Gosh, you can hear it all the way over here!"

Yet, it was the prison whistle, the high

whining blast like the cry of some cruel hungry beast of prey, rising and falling over the little town and all the flat corn-lands, the voice of the master of life, the voice of the god of the corn-lands. The four prisoners in this restaurant knew that call well; and everyone in the town and everyone living on the corn-lands knew it as thoroly as they did.

"Look," said Blackie, pointing thru a window behind them, "you can just see the top of the prison walls from here. Who would have thunk you could see it so far?"

The men turned from their food to stare gloomily, while the fat proprietor hid a knowing smile behind his curled monstaches.

"Two thousand men in hell," said Jones quietly, "and all these Hoosiers know is corn and hogs. God, is it worth while? Twenty-five of our boys still in there, ninety-six still in Leavenworth—God, why do we let ourselves be crucified for these Hoosiers?"

"Jim Downey's got fifteen more years to go; so has Frank Varrochek, Harry Bly, Ralph Snellins and four more," said John Brown quietly, piercing with his deep blue eyes thru all the distance. "And Jack Small has consumption; and George Mulvane is going crazy—Bill, do you think we'll ever get 'em out alive?"

Ramon suddenly became hysterical.

He stood up with brandished fists and shook them at the distant prison, quivering with the

rage of five years of silence. His olive face darkened with blood, and locks of his long raven-black hair fell in his eyes, so that he could not see. He flamed into sudden Latin eloquence.

"Beasts!" he cried, in a choked, furious voice, "robbers of the poor, murderers of the young; hangmen, capitalists, patriots; you think you have punished us! You think we will be silent now, and not speak of your crimes! You dirty fools, you can never silence us! You can torture us, you can keep us in prison for all our lives—"

"Oh, Ramon," Blackie cried, pushing him back into his seat, and patting him soothingly on the shoulder. "Easy, easy! We all feel as sore as you do, Ramon, and we hate just as hard. By God, we hate them. But easy now, old-timer, easy!"

The others helped quiet the nerve-wracked young Mexican, and he finally subsided and sat there with his face between his hands until they had finished their food. Then the four paid their check to the discreet but amused fat proprietor, and went into the street on their way to the railroad station, trying again to appear casual and unconcerned.

At the next corner another policeman was lounging against a store window, and it was with an effort that each of the freed men passed his vacant eye. They braced up and walked by bravely, but they still found it hard



to believe that they were really free.

It would take them some months to become accustomed to the greater prison house known as the world.

## The Coal Breaker

ALWAYS between the sky and their earth the miners saw the unhallowed, grim, irregular mass of the coal-breaker, a tall structure black with dust and ugly as a giant toad. It dominated the whole valley.

There were green trees in that valley, meadows and flowers for the light to kindle in the summer days. The spring brot a soft flush there, much as in other parts of the world. There were stars and moon at night, the sun by day.

There was beauty, but it lived furtively under a shadow. A great sombre coal mine was in that valley. It had dragged its black, slimy trail across the clear brightness of nature. A town of dirty, sad houses was heaped about like stacks of filth on the grass of the valley level. Huge hills of slag stood about the mine's mouth, mounds of darkness from which spurted over jets of diabolical flame.

The humble men of all the races lived in the shambling houses of the town. They shuf-

fled in the raw morning thru the muddy streets toward the mine pit, and returned in the dusk with their emptied dinner pails, their faces black as sinister masks, their bodies dripping sweat and stooped in weary curves.

Saturday nights there was one brief candle of romance lit in this dark reality of toil. The miners drew their pay then, and spent some of it on liquor. They danced, they sang, they fought and grew sentimental, they remembered for a moment their human heritage of play.

I was in Miduvski's general store on a night such as this. The place was dimly lit by lamps, and Miduvski, a big, bald-headed, shrewd speculator, stood plotting behind his counter. There were a few odd customers lounging about. Nothing happened for an hour or so; then some of the miners came trooping in.

There were about eight of them, and a few boys who worked in the coal-breaker trailed admiringly in the rear. The miners were dressed in overalls and black caps with tiny lamps fastened on them, and these lamps seemed like the horns of a group of wild-faced devils. The men were of all races, most of them short and squarly built. Their white teeth flashed out of the gloom of their faces as they laughed uproariously, for they were all a little drunk.

"Set 'em up, Miduvski!" shouted one, a stout powerful man with a merry black face

and little Chinese eyes. "The kid here is treating!"

He dragged forward a youngster who was no more than ten years old, and who was dressed in ragged overalls too long for him, and a miner's cap that came over his ears. The boy had high cheek bones, and coal dust darkened his straight nose and sandy hair of a young Slav.

"The little Hunkie is goin' to treat!" roared the stout miner again. "This is his first week in the breaker, and he's celebratin'. Ainchyer, kid?"

"Yêh!" the boy said, laughing mirthlessly and staring at them all with big, dazed eyes. "I'm a man now!"

At this there was a general outbreak of laughter, and one of the men clapped the boy approvingly on the shoulder. Miduvski filled the glasses with whiskey, which they gulped down with great smacking of lips and long "Ah-h-hs!"

"Give the kid a hooker too!" shouted a tall, reckless Irishman, pounding on the counter. "He's one of us now, by gory!"

"Yes, yes!" cried the other men, and the storekeeper poured another glass of the red, fiery stuff, which they boy swallowed mechanically.

"Yah!" shouted the men admiringly, "that's the idea!"

They watched the boy take out his pay envelope.



lope and extract a dollar bill which he laid on the counter.

"Game to the core!" the Irishman said, slapping the boy on the back again. "Let's have another now! My treat!"

The boy leaned against the counter, and looked about him foolishly. "I ain't goin' to be a miner 'all my life," he announced, with a superior air. "I'm goin' to be a doctor!"

"Hooray for Jansy!" the men shouted, reaching out for the newly-filled glasses.

The boy drank with them again, with a careless pride on his young face. But the next moment the wide store with its shadows of lamp-light and its dark, deep corners and laden shelves grew dim and whirling to his eyes. He felt like rushing out into the fragrant country night, to fling himself down on the cool grass somewhere, and to breathe pure air. A miner offered him a chew of tobacco, and the boy thought it necessary to stuff the vile brown plug in his mouth, and to munch it busily. But he was sick to the pit of his stomach.

A small boy had crept shyly into the place, and was looking at the scene with fear. He came over finally and plucked the young young worker by the sleeve.

"Jansy," he said, "Mommer's lookin' for ye everywhere, and she says she'll give ye an awful bekin' if ye don't come right home. She's waitin' for yer pay!"

The breaker-boy pushed his young brother

away with a silly smile. "Beat it!" he said haughtily, tho reeling and sick with the tobacco and rot-gut whiskey. "I'm a man now. Just tell Mommer I'm a man now!"

The little boy drew back in fright, and stood staring at his brother from the doorway, doubtful as to what to do.

"Hooray for Jansy!" the men shouted in glee, lifting the boy on their shoulders. "Game to the core!"

"We'll have to get him a girl tonight!" the Irishman cried waving his glass of whiskey recklessly. "He's a real man now, the little Polak, workin', drinkin', chewin', and whorin'!"

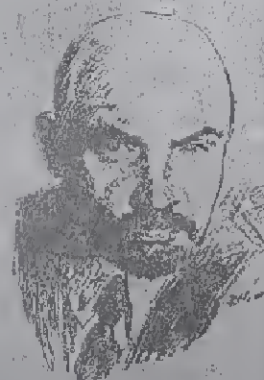
The boy grinned wearily. Outside in the night could be seen the monstrous form of the breaker in whose black bowels gangs of children slaved in fierce silence ten hours each day, sorting the slag from the coal with raw fingers. The coal breaker dominated the town, it blotted out the night and stars from human eyes. Its dust darkened all the houses and rested heavily on the weeds struggling about the mine's mouth, and in that valley even childhood was fouled and withered by the black, black dust of the breaker.

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